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No. 4
"RUSSIA HAS A PLAN" SERIES

CHILDREN IN THE SOVIET UNION

by

Beatrice King

Author of
Changing Man;
The Soviet Education System

2d.

This is No. 4 in the Series

"RUSSIA HAS A PLAN"

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(PAT SLOAN)

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No. 3. A NATION OF CHAMPIONS
(GEORGE SINFIELD)

Others in the series will deal with Health Service, Science, etc., and will be published at short intervals.

July, 1941.

CHILDREN IN THE SOVIET UNION

By BEATRICE KING

Author of Changing Man; The Soviet Education System

IT was on one of my periodic visits to the Soviet Union. In the Museum of Fine Arts there was an exhibition of children's drawings. In front of a picture stood a burly, pleasant man surrounded by a throng of boys and girls. Some were holding his arms, others hanging on to his coat, others pressing nearer as he pointed out some feature or other. I watched him go along in the midst of a happy group, obviously a beloved friend. "Who is that man?" I asked a guide. "That's the Commissar for Education." And then across the room I saw a small group of youngsters, the oldest not more than five years old, going round with another beloved adult looking at the drawings and liking it.

Another picture rises in my memory. The large lecture and theatre hall in a factory club by the Moscow River. The building is full of noise coming from the throats of some 600 boys and girls of all ages. The few adults are making vain attempts tc get quiet. Presently clapping is heard and up on the platform come half-a-dozen boys and girls ranging from 15 to 17. A boy takes the chair and holds up his hand. Within a minute there is silence. It is a May Day celebration for the children of the district. There are speeches by the youngsters, there is a ceremony—the red 'kerchief and the badge of the Pioneer is received by the new members of this body. There is a concert, song and dance, etc. And the whole proceedings are carried out by the half-a-dozen youngsters who are the celebration committee.

Yet another picture. This time in Kiev, Children's Day, May 2. A lad of about twelve, dressed as a policeman, stands

in the middle of the main thoroughfare and directs the traffic: trams and buses and lorries and cars. A few minutes' walk is the park, with thousands of children. Here in one part they are playing dancing games, helped by an elder brother and sister; a little further there is obviously a concert or something. In the open air are rows and rows of youngsters. On the stage is a five-year-old little girl who is telling stories. Her eyes dance with laughter, now they are big with fear and now they show pride. It was a fairy story and the wicked one was punished and the good lived—not in selfish happiness ever after, but in happy activity performing great deeds for the country. The child is, of course, a great artist—a natural artist.

Laughter from another part of the park. That's Punch and Judy. And here is a tent full of cakes and fruit and ices, and there seems no end to the customers. And how good they all look. That young man of ten or so walking with serious mien, and looking around now and then, is a monitor helping to keep order in the park. What a happy day it is! Yet there's no shrieking or quarrelling and no litter, though I cannot anywhere see any notices threatening fines for litter.

I could fill a book with such pictures of the life of Soviet children. The suspicious, critical reader will say by now, yes, that's all very well. But what about the other children, those whom you didn't see, the ragged, and the uncared for? *There are no ragged, no uncared-for, no under-nourished, no unwanted* children in the U.S.S.R. today. There were plenty at one time. The war, civil war, intervention and famine left thousands of orphans who for some years roamed the land, a menace to themselves and others. It took the time and the labour and the self-sacrifice of the best people and it took money to re-train these children, to turn them into civilised people, friendly to others, instead of savages at war with everyone. And it is interesting that it was the O.G.P.U. that contributed most to the solution of this terrific problem.

"Children are the joy of life." "Children are the nation's wealth." "Children are the nation's future." One sees this often in the U.S.S.R. In that country children have legal rights. They must be kept and cared for until 16 years. If parents are not discharging their obligations satisfactorily they will be warned, summoned, and finally the children will be taken away to a home,

and they will have to contribute to its keep. Unemployment doesn't exist, everybody who wants to work can get a living wage, therefore parents cannot plead the excuse of unemployment or poverty. Corporal punishment is a criminal offence, whether in the home or the school. A child has the legal right to summon for assault a parent who beats him.

Children also have the right to free education up to 15 years of age.

THE CHILD'S HEALTH

The care of the child begins well before it is born. In every city, in every collective or state farm, there are women's medical consultation centres linked up with hospitals, maternity homes, and the Institute of Mother and Child in the big cities. Here the woman who becomes pregnant is encouraged to come for advice. Here she will be examined and given attention. A place will be reserved for her in the nearest maternity hospital. If she is working, her manager will be informed. From time to time she is examined, and if the doctor considers that her work is too heavy for her, she must be put on a lighter job at the same pay. She must receive 8 weeks' pregnancy leave with full pay, and be taken back at her original job. She will receive a layette and an allowance for the extra need during that period. When she returns to the factory she will leave her baby in the factory crèches and she will be allowed 30 minutes off from work every 4 hours to feed the baby. If the mother is unable to feed it, there are milk kitchens where she can obtain cheaply the proper milk. If at the first examination the doctor is convinced that it would be injurious for the mother to have a baby, or that the baby could not be born normal, then an abortion is permitted.

Soviet women can afford to have children, the country wants children, the more the better, for there are not enough workers. Large families receive grants.

After birth the child undergoes periodic examinations until it goes to school. Here it comes under the supervision of the school dentist and school doctor. Every city school and every central rural school has a doctor, a dentist and a nurse on the school staff. Children are examined regularly until they leave school. For children who suffer from such illnesses as tuberculosis, rheumatic heart, and so on, there are special health schools in the forest and by the sea. Here they undergo a special health

regime, while at the same time continuing their education. They are recommended by the school doctor and they may stay anything from 3 months to 8 years, according to the stage of the disease. Many of these health schools are run by the trade unions, others by the Commissariat of Health. Many ordinary schools have special rest rooms and diets for children who are very nervy or who tire easily. All this health service is free to the parents, except in the Health Schools where, according to income, a small contribution is made towards the board. If, however, a trade union sends children, it is free.

EDUCATION

This begins at birth if the mother is able and willing to send the child to a crèche. Let me say here at once that no one is compelled to send her baby to a crèche. A mother can do as she pleases. I have known Soviet mothers who have preferred to have their babies at home, and did so, though in many cases they would have been better in a crèche. Mothers are like that all the world over.

Every factory and collective and state farm is instructed to have crèches for the babies of their workers, and they do, but at present there are not enough. It is a matter of time to get the material and labour for the buildings and to train the qualified workers. Every day there are reports in the Soviet Press of new crèches in a fishers' or hunters' settlement in the Arctic or a mountain hamlet in the East. There are now places for over two million babies. The crèches vary very much. There are some in which babies stay 8 hours, some in which they stay all day, and some all night, according to the circumstances of the worker. There are travelling seasonal crèches for mothers who work on farms, which follow them about. In the summer the town crèches are moved into the country.

The new crèches are very beautiful places, built on the latest health ideas, with open-air verandahs and sunny rooms with sliding windows. There is a doctor and a matron in charge, and teachers for the older babies. They stay until 3 or 3½ years' old, and during that time they learn how to handle things and to help each other. They have everything that is necessary for proper growth and development. Parents pay according to their wages, from 10 to 20 roubles a month, and where necessary it is all free.

The next stage in education is the nursery-infant school from 3½ to 7 or 8 years. Here, too, the three summer months for many of the children are spent in the country. There is a similar variety of nursery-infant schools, as of crèches, according to the needs of the mother. They are not only provided by industries and farms and administration departments, they are also provided by the housing committee of a block of flats. As in the crèches, so here meals are provided: Breakfast—milk, porridge, bread and butter, and stewed fruit and milk. Dinner—soup, a meat dish and vegetables, a sweet and fruit. At four o'clock milk and a bun. Six o'clock, either here or at home, egg or fish or macaroni, etc., bread and butter and milk, and stewed fruit. In the nursery-infant school they learn to dance and sing and play, they draw and paint and make things with wood and hammer and nails. They learn to read and write and reckon. So they go on from stage to stage till at fifteen there is a family conference—what is Ivan or Manya going to do for a living? No worry here as to whether there'll be a job for him or her. Far from it, there are so many jobs crying out to be done that it's rather hard for Ivan or Manya to make up their minds.

With the new Trade Schools, Ivan may desire to enter one of these. Such training, lasting from six months to two years, is completely free of charge, and Ivan receives state maintenance at the same time. On leaving the school, he has an uninterrupted period of four years in industry before getting called up for military service.

But both Ivan and Manya may prefer a university training. This is free of charge to all students who acquire a certain standard, but if they fall below the required level they or their parents must then pay a small fee (they can actually earn enough for this through a part-time job if they prefer). In this way both boys and girls can rise to the highest level of education free of charge, and even be in receipt of maintenance grants where family circumstances demand it. Orphans or those whose parents for some reason are earning low wages are admitted free. For gifted children there are special schools for art, for music, for dancing. They enter these instead of the ordinary schools at 8 years. Here they receive, free until 15 years, the general education and the special training in their particular talent. And this is available to country children as well as to town children in every part of the Union.

The Kiev Music School, for example, has a hostel for a number of children from distant collective farms. The same applies to other towns. Naturally, education is more difficult to provide in the sparsely populated places far away from transport and centres, but it is provided.

Early in September a message was heard over the wireless that a party of children from an Arctic settlement had set off for school. The first part of their journey had to be done on foot, there was no other way. It took them a fortnight. Then they were met by an aeroplane which took them the rest of the journey to the boarding school. But the desire for education is so great that no obstacles are too difficult to overcome and everybody helps.

The school life is very much linked up with the daily life of the people outside the school, so that the children at an early age become interested in the work of the country, in the people who do great things for the country. Factory representatives, Stakhanovites, authors and artists, daring fliers, engineers and explorers visit schools to tell the children about their work and to encourage in them a love for their country and a readiness to work it.

School is only one part of a child's life, there is home, and the free time, when there are school tasks or home duties to perform. And there are holidays. Let's take the holiday first. Every trade union, every institution is striving to provide sufficient holiday camps for the children of its workers from the towns. At present about 75 per cent of children of school age from the bigger towns spend six weeks in a camp at the sea or in the country. It's not the kind of holiday camp we know for children. These camps consist of large estates with the houses that used to belong to the rich, or with entirely new buildings. No one under sixteen sleeps in tents. They sleep in bedrooms or dormitories, very simply furnished, but fresh and clean and attractive. Those old enough make their own beds and tidy the bedrooms. All other work is done by a domestic staff. The children spend their time in a great variety of activities. There is a workshop where almost anything can be made. There is a nature room for the nature lovers, a reading room and a library. There is, of course, dancing and singing and acting, there are all kinds of games and sports according to age, and if the camp is by

the sea it will own a yacht or motor-boat, as well as a number of rowing boats. Many children go to these camps free, for others, parents contribute. Some parents take a cottage in the country or rooms in a co-operative holiday house and have their children with them for the whole summer.

As the summer holiday is three months for the younger children, there is a month or six weeks to deal with in the town. First and foremost in satisfying the youngsters' need for play and activity are the Parks of Culture and Rest. The very large ones have a Children's Open Air City. Here, under sympathetic adult supervision—the supervisors are paid—they can engage in any activity imaginable. There is every kind of sport and athletics. They can dance or sing, or play in an orchestra, or act or paint or model in clay. They can listen to concerts and watch puppet shows and plays, or attend lectures and discussions if they are older. Or they can lie on the grass and do nothing if they wish. Smaller parks provide fewer facilities, but they have them, even if it's only just a part separated off where the children can play round games. Even the libraries go out of doors to the children in the summer.

And it's not only the authorities who look after the children on their holidays and free time. More and more the women of the flats surrounding a courtyard will organise at least one play room, very often a workshop, too, or rooms which they have obtained from the House Committee. The equipment they have collected from tenants. I remember in Kiev I was taken over a children's club by a 60 years' old working woman—she was no longer working outside the home—whose energy and persistence had organised a small, simple club for the children of the street. She was now chairman of the Housing Committee and she had made a factory adopt this club. Time and time again it was the mothers themselves who first set up crèches and nursery infant schools, even going so far as selecting from among themselves mothers to be trained to look after the children in these places.

This year thousands of children were sent away for the Christmas holidays to camps and holiday homes by trade unions at their expense. In winter the delights of skating, tobogganing and ski-ing are added to their other pleasures. Russian mothers do not hate school holidays.

PLAY

There is time for play during term, too, especially as homework is being cut down. Girls and boys do not have to sit about or wander aimlessly about the streets wondering what on earth they can do, and getting into trouble. So important is the leisure part of a child's life that the Commissariat of Education has a special department for out-of-school activities. There are special courses from one to two years, and some in universities from 3 to 4 years for the training of supervisors for out-of-school activities. There are institutes known as Houses of Arts Education for Children—and arts include every spontaneous activity, where they study all the problems concerned with children's play. They find out the best kinds of songs and games, they learn how to attract children and they teach mothers. Above all, they find out what children need and how to satisfy that need. Here's an instance:

In 1937 there were films and plays about a great hero of the Civil War, Chapaev, who, among other things, was a marvellous shot. The imagination of the boys was fired and many of them bought pistols, climbed on to roofs and took shots at the windows of surrounding flats. They were Chapaevs shooting the enemy! It became quite serious. The staff of the Moscow House for the Arts of Education of Children had to solve the problem, and they did, not by punishment, but by devising games which gave the boys the feeling of daring and heroism and, incidentally, trained them to be good shots. This is typical of the way children's "bad behaviour" is dealt with. The cause is discovered and then their urge to action is satisfied in a constructive way.

In the schools there is an ever increasing number of Children's Circles of an infinite variety, to which the youngsters may come for 2 hours twice a week. Here they can sew or embroider, or make model aeroplanes, or wireless sets, or read poetry and plays, or dance, or act, or sing, or play in the orchestra. The school and the equipment and the instructors are all provided free.

But there are more facilities outside the schools. The Soviet Union is the only country where children have their own clubs. Very soon every town and collective or state farm will have its Pioneer Palace or House. Every week one reads of new ones being opened. In Leningrad one immense wing is given up to artistic activities—with a ball room, a theatre, a lecture hall and,

literally, hundreds of activity rooms. Another large wing is given up to scientific and technical activities, with excellently equipped laboratories and workshops. I have seen the place full with some thousand children. Yet the beautiful carpets and silken curtains were unspotted. No one broke the priceless vases, no one destroyed anything.

In the capital cities like Moscow and Leningrad there are district Pioneer Houses as well as central Palaces. Moscow has seventeen.

Next in popularity to the Pioneer Houses come the Technical Stations, large institutions given up entirely to technical activities where boys and girls who have a gift for invention or who just like solving scientific problems practically, can come and satisfy their desires. There are central technical stations for a whole republic, and there are district and town ones. The central stations train instructors, give advice and solve problems set as a rule by the youngsters. Many of their inventions have been so good that they have been applied industrially or on the collective farms.

Added to these, there are biology and young naturalist stations. Many of these are great estates where the children carry on the most thrilling tasks, producing a plant which grows potatoes underneath and tomatoes on top (both good), producing a melon which will grow in the Moscow region so as not to take up space on railways or spoil the melons by transport, producing new kinds of fruit, or a wheat which will grow in the short summer of the colder climates. In the Moscow Zoo there is a children's biology club. Here they learn all about the animals, help with their care, go off for excursions into the woods to study animals under natural conditions.

It is necessary, too, that children shall listen to good music, see good plays, films, learn to appreciate art. Here, too, the children's needs are satisfied. First come the Theatres for Youth. These are professional theatres, mostly small, though the new ones have seating room for 900-1,000, where trained actors play to young people of all ages. For those under 8 there are puppet shows, for those between 8 and 12 there are mostly fairy tales, for those over 12 there is a great variety: fairy tales, Soviet plays of adventure, of school life, plays about the making of socialism, foreign plays, Kipling's Jungle Stories, and so on. Children pay,

in English value, from sixpence to one shilling, but many children go in free. There are just over 100 of these Theatres for Youth at present in U.S.S.R. Theatres in all towns spend some six weeks in the summer visiting distant towns and collective and state farms. Next to the theatre come the children's cinemas. These, too, are increasing everywhere and travelling cinemas visit rural areas. By the way, children under 16 are not permitted to attend evening performances in the cinema or theatre.

It goes without saying that there are special children's libraries apart from those in the school, while music is so essential a part of Soviet life that children's concerts are a regular feature of their life. It is quite impossible to remember everything that exists for the use of children.

Now in return for all that the country gives the children it expects certain things from them. It expects them, first of all, to behave well at home, to be considerate and helpful, to take any share that may be necessary in making home life pleasant. At school children are expected to do their work well, to be disciplined. Unless they do their work well and acquire skill and knowledge, they will not be able to make their full contribution to the development of Socialism, to help increase production and agriculture so as to make every one's life richer. The older ones are expected to help the younger ones where possible, to help keep order and cleanliness in the school. And on the whole the children respond to these demands.

SPECIAL CHILDREN

But there are children who either will not or cannot respond to the demands of the community. There are the children who are handicapped physically, the deaf and dumb and the blind. There are children who are handicapped mentally, who for some reason have a lower intelligence than the normal and cannot work at the same rate as normal children. And there are the morally backward children who through some cause in their upbringing have turned to stealing or are destructive or vicious. All these children receive special consideration. There are nursery infants' schools in the country for the small deaf and dumb. Until 8 years they live in country homes where they are taught to adapt themselves to life. For those of school age there are deaf and dumb schools, where more and more every advanced

technique of teaching to hear is used. I have seen some of these schools grow from primitive poorly equipped places to fine first-class schools, even carrying on research work. An important part of the education of the deaf and dumb is training for a trade. All the schools have workshops and they are adopted by some factory or other. Without exception these children make good, and not only in factories. Some of them become artists, some scientists, some painters. In the school they produce plays, they have orchestras. In every possible way their life is made normal.

I do not personally know much about the blind children, except that they are cared for in special schools.

The mentally backward have their own schools, too. In Leningrad there is an education institute which has one of the finest sections for the study of backwardness in children anywhere in the world. Here again the aim is, as far as possible, to bring them near the normal child. Very often the special methods and apparatus and medical treatment is completely successful and after 3 or 4 years in one of these schools a boy or a girl will be able to go on to a training school for ordinary children. Here again work with the hands is used a good deal and by the time they leave they have the beginnings of a trade so that they can become useful members of the community and not feel outcasts.

For delinquent children there are special establishments, of which the doors are open and children are free to leave. These are definitely places for re-education, and they have boys and girls from 8 to 18 years. The older established ones, like the Dzerzhinsky Home, have their own factories as well as their own school. The boys and girls live in the school, and the fact that the sexes are mixed helps much in restoring normal habits. This school is now almost entirely self-supporting. Orders are fulfilled in the school's workshops and paid for. School clubs, with a variety of activities, are also a great help. Gradually, through work which has a purpose, through the trust and the confidence and the kindness which the teachers show to them, through the ordered civilised living in a community, even the wildest ones become law-abiding. They are not cut off from outside life. Parties of them go to the Kharkov Children's Theatre and, what is very important, sit with the other children. An Army regiment has adopted the Home. Soviet heroes visit

the school and meet the children. I was told that the number who run away is very, very small and they almost always come back of their own accord.

It is hoped that in time all parents will be trained in the bringing up of children—(" Parents' Universities " are a new and growing movement)—and that working together with the school, delinquency will disappear.

Apart from all these, there are orphan children, who live in children's homes either in a town or in the country. They have much say in the running of the homes in so far as they have the experience. Wherever possible they go to the ordinary day school in the district near their Home, so that they shall mix with the community and feel part of the community. Because a normal family life is considered desirable, in many cases these Homes are being replaced by a system of state-financed adoption by private families.

PIONEERS AND OCTOBRISTS

Like children in other countries, Soviet children have their own organisation, called Octobrists for the 8 to 10 years' old and Pioneers for the 10 to 16 years' old. These children take an oath of loyalty to the working class and its leaders. A distinguishing feature about the Pioneers' organisation is its internationalism. All children, irrespective of race or creed, are brothers, all children, whatever their nationality, have the same right to a full and happy life.

The organisation does much to make the children's life happy and to give them an understanding of the principles upon which their society is based. It cares particularly for children who may be neglected, children who are in need. It is the organisation where children learn self-reliance and fearlessness, where they learn to help towards establishing a better world, not only for Soviet workers, but for the workers everywhere.

In all these different ways the Soviet authority puts ideals into practice for its children. It does not merely talk about the need for crèches, or kindergartens or clubs. It builds them and staffs them and gets them going. In return it is creating a workers' society, rich not only materially, but rich spiritually.

How is it that a country which just over twenty years ago was so backward is today, in respect of the care for its children, as

well as in many other respects, the most advanced in the world? The answer is quite simple: because it is a socialist country. The worker gets back the whole of the results of his labour in wages and social services. There are no middlemen, private owners of production, of land, of transport, all raking off profits. Production is for use only, and the more workers produce the more they get in return. There is no governing class whose interests are opposed to the workers, who try to cheat them, to fool them, to keep them ignorant. The governing class *is the workers*, and the Communist party which leads the country is a workers' party so that all its aims, all its plans, all its thoughts are directed to the betterment of workers' conditions.

All this education, all these services at the disposal of the workers' children is only possible in a socialist country, because a socialist country to grow and develop must have *all* its people educated and cultured, whatever their work or life has to be. They must be educated and cultured because, besides working, they have to govern their country, otherwise they would, as Lenin said, be blind people, and blind people cannot lead.

It is only when the workers lead that they get a full return for their labour, a full and good life for themselves and their children.

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